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ACTION WHA-00

INFO	LOG-00	COR-01	CIAE-00	DODE-00	SRPP-00	UTED-00	VC-00
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	OMB-01	PA-00	PM-00	PRS-00	ACE-00	P-00	SP-00
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SENSITIVE

C O R R E C T E D C O P Y (PARA MARKING)

FOR WHA/PDA (BYERS), WHA/AND (NARANJO, SHANNON)
NSC FOR AMB. MAISTO
E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: KPAO, PREL, VE
SUBJECT: GOV PRESS RELATIONS

1. (SBU) FOLLOWING TEXT IS ALL SENSITIVE BUT UNCLASSIFIED.
2. (SBU) SUMMARY: WHAT APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN A BRIEF GOV ATTEMPT TO IMPROVE PRESS RELATIONS IN JANUARY-FEBRUARY HAS COME TO
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AN END, AND A NEW WAVE OF AGGRESSION AGAINST THE MEDIA HAS
BEGUN. THE GOV FACES CONTRADICTORY NEEDS THAT HINDER ITS
PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY AND CARRY IMPLICATIONS FOR ITS
FUTURE PUBLIC COMMENTS INVOLVING THE U.S. - POSSIBLY AS
EARLY AS THIS WEEK'S CONFERENCE IN MONTERREY. END SUMMARY.

BACKGROUND. . .

3. (SBU) ALWAYS-UNFRIENDLY GOV-MEDIA RELATIONS WERE EXACERBATED
IN THE WAKE OF THE DECEMBER AND JANUARY OPPOSITION PROTESTS,
WHICH SHOWCASED THE GOV'S VULNERABLE POPULAR STANDING. THE
MEDIA TRANSMITTED (AND, TO BE FAIR, MAGNIFIED) THIS

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VULNERABILITY AND SO BECAME AGAIN A TARGET FOR THE GOVERNMENT'S IRE. THE MOST DRAMATIC INCIDENT WAS THE 1/7 DEMONSTRATION BY A SMALL BUT INTIMIDATING MOB OF ABOUT 75 OUTSIDE THE DOORS OF THE DAILY "EL NACIONAL." SOME COMMENTATORS FEARED THIS WAS THE LONG-AWAITED CONCRETIZING OF THE BOLIVARIAN CIRCLES AS THE MVR'S ARMED BRANCH, THE FIRST TANGIBLE CASE OF GOVERNMENT-DIRECTED POPULAR VIOLENCE AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT'S POLITICAL ENEMIES.

. . . AND BACKLASH

4. (SBU) YET THIS INCIDENT - AND FAR MORE IMPORTANT, THE INTERNATIONAL REACTION IN PROTEST OF IT - MARKED A TEMPORARY TURNING POINT IN THE GOVERNMENT'S BEHAVIOR TOWARD THE MEDIA. THE GOV WAS CLEARLY TAKEN ABACK BY THE IMMEDIACY OF THE

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RESPONSES BY THE INTER-AMERICAN HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

(CIDH) AND THE INTER-AMERICAN PRESS ASSOCIATION AND, MOST CRUCIALLY, BY THE 1/8 VISIT BY AMBASSADOR HRINAK TO "EL NACIONAL'S" OFFICE AND THE STATE DEPARTMENT SPOKESMAN'S COMMENT ON THE ISSUE. THE FIRM AND RAPID USG RESPONSE SEEMS TO HAVE BEEN AN IMPORTANT STIMULUS TO THE GOV'S RECONSIDERATION OF ITS MEDIA STANCE.

THE GOV RECONSIDERS

5. (SBU) ON THE EVE OF THE 1/23 OPPOSITION MARCH, CHAVEZ HELD AN EXTRAORDINARY MEETING 1/22 AT MIRAFLORES WITH MORE THAN ONE HUNDRED PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICIALS FROM GOVERNMENT MINISTRIES, NATIONAL ASSEMBLY MEMBERS SUCH AS (FORMER EDITOR OF "EL CORREO DEL PRESIDENTE") JUAN BARRETO, AND DIRECTORS OF STATE MEDIA AGENCIES. THE MEETING, AIMED AT "REVIEWING THE GOVERNMENT'S PUBLIC COMMUNICATIONS POLICY," WAS CLOSED TO THE PUBLIC, BUT SOME OF ITS CONCLUSIONS CAME OUT. THESE INCLUDED:

- ESTABLISH A COORDINATING COMMITTEE TO DESIGN A COMMON PUBLIC AFFAIRS POLICY;
- MOVE FORWARD WITH PLANS FOR "ALTERNATIVE MEDIA";
- REVIEW RADIO FREQUENCY LICENSES OUTSIDE CARACAS.

6. (SBU) RESULTS WERE APPARENT BEFORE THE END OF JANUARY. PAID ADVERTISEMENTS BY PRO-GOVERNMENT JOURNALISTS DENOUNCED "A

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SECTOR OF THE NATION'S MEDIA THAT APPEAL TO FOREIGN GROUPS
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TO GET INVOLVED IN THE DOMESTIC POLITICS OF THE COUNTRY." NUMEROUS "COMMUNITY RADIO" STATIONS BEGAN OPERATING OUTSIDE CARACAS - SURPRISING ESTABLISHED RADIO OWNERS WHO HAD FOR YEARS BEEN TOLD THAT THERE WAS INSUFFICIENT FREQUENCY SPECTRUM TO EXPAND THE MARKET. IN VALENCIA, FOR EXAMPLE, SIX NEW COMMUNITY RADIO STATIONS HAVE BEGUN OPERATIONS IN THE PAST SIX WEEKS.

CHARMED, WE'RE SURE

7. (SBU) THE MOST STRIKING OUTCOME OF THE PUBLIC AFFAIRS STRATEGY REVIEW, HOWEVER, WAS A SUDDEN SLEW OF CHAVEZ INTERVIEWS WITH FOREIGN MEDIA. THESE INTERVIEW REQUESTS HAD LAIN DORMANT FOR MONTHS, AND YET WITHIN THREE WEEKS MIRAFLORES HAD SCHEDULED AND COMPLETED IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS FOR FIVE FOREIGN BROADCASTERS, INCLUDING CNN IN SPANISH, AND SEVERAL PRINT MEDIA. MIRAFLORES ALSO OFFERED TO PAY EXPENSES FOR REPORTERS TO COME FROM THE MIAMI HERALD, EL NUEVO HERALD AND THE FT. LAUDERDALE SUN-SENTINEL. ALL REFUSED TO ACCEPT ANY GOV FINANCING.

8. (SBU) CHAVEZ TRIED ONCE MORE TO ENGAGE THE DOMESTIC PRESS, WITH A PRESS CONFERENCE AT A FEBRUARY 4 MILITARY CELEBRATION. THE ATTEMPT FAILED WHEN THE PRESIDENT GREW

IRRITATED WITH ONE VENEZUELAN REPORTER'S QUESTIONS ON CORRUPTION ALLEGATIONS; CHAVEZ ANGRILY SAID, "THIS PRESS CONFERENCE IS SUPPOSED TO BE ABOUT THE MEANING OF FEBRUARY 4." BUT EXCEPT FOR THIS INCIDENT, CHAVEZ ASSUMED A FAIRLY

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PACIFIC ATTITUDE DURING MOST OF FEBRUARY, FREQUENTLY REPEATING HIS CALLS FOR DIALOGUE AND THE MANTRA OF "HELP ME SHEATHE MY SWORD" (WHICH ONE UNKIND WAG COMPARED WITH, "STOP ME BEFORE I KILL AGAIN").

BEHIND THE CURTAIN

9. (SBU) THE APPARENTLY KINDER, GENTLER GOV APPROACH TO THE MEDIA WAS NOT THE WHOLE TRUTH. BEHIND THE SCENES THE THREATS CONTINUED, SUCH AS A JANUARY 14 ORDER THAT CONATEL

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STEP UP ITS INVESTIGATIONS INTO TV AND RADIO BROADCASTERS' PROGRAM CONTENT AND ADVERTISING RECEIPTS. THE GOVERNMENT HELD ITS TONGUE THROUGH THE CANTON AND IAPA VISITS IN WHAT WAS A CLEAR EFFORT TO DEMONSTRATE UNRESTRICTED PRESS FREEDOM IN VENEZUELA AND SHOW THAT THE GOVERNMENT ITSELF IS NOT HOSTILE TO THE MEDIA. BUT CANTON'S VISIT ENDED WITH A PRESS CONFERENCE DISRUPTED BY CHAVEZ SUPPORTERS, ADDITIONAL MILITARY OFFICERS PUBLICLY CRITICIZED THE GOVERNMENT, AND A BY-NOW THOROUGHLY DISTRUSTFUL MEDIA WOULD NOT AGREE TO A TRUCE. WHETHER THE GOVERNMENT WAS SINCERE IN ITS CHANGE OF TONE AND ITS DESIRE TO SHEATHE THE SWORD, OR WHETHER THE TACTIC WAS MEANT ONLY TO BUY TIME, WE CANNOT KNOW. BUT BY LATE FEBRUARY IT WAS CLEAR THAT THE GOV HAD DECIDED TO END THE CHARM OFFENSIVE AND BEGIN ANOTHER OFFENSIVE OF A DIFFERENT SORT.

NO MORE MR. CLEAN

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10. (SBU) IN THE PAST THREE WEEKS THE ATTACKS ON THE MEDIA HAVE RECOMMENCED. ON 3/3 "EL NACIONAL" REPRINTED AN INTERVIEW WITH "LE MONDE DIPLOMATIQUE" DIRECTOR IGANCIO RAMONET, FIRST CARRIED ON A VENEZUELAN INTERNET NEWS SITE, WHEREIN RAMONET (HERETOFORE A FAN) WAS SAID TO HAVE HARSHLY CRITICIZED THE PRESIDENT. THE INTERVIEW WAS FAKE, "EL NACIONAL" PRINTED IT, AND THE GOV LOST NO TIME IN ASSAILING THE PAPER'S CREDIBILITY. (THE ORIGINS OF THE INTERVIEW ARE UNCLEAR; MANY IN THE MEDIA SUSPECT IT WAS A GOV TRAP.)

11. (SBU) THERE CONTINUED TO BE INSTANCES OF REPORTERS BEING BEATEN OR MEDIA EQUIPMENT BEING DESTROYED; AN DEPUTY ALBE

RTO

JORDAN PUBLISHED A LIST OF 75 INCIDENTS OF AGGRESSION AGAINST THE MEDIA. DURING HIS 3/10 "ALO, PRESIDENTE," CHAVEZ AGAIN BLASTED THE MEDIA FOR ITS "CONSPIRACIES" AND "LIES," SINGLING OUT AS EXAMPLES COLOMBIAN CARACOL TV AND "EL NACIONAL," WHICH CHAVEZ URGED VENEZUELAN NOT TO BUY. ON 3/12 VICE PRESIDENT DIOSDADO CABELLO NOTED THAT THE GOV "MIGHT NOT BE TOLERANT" FOREVER AND MIGHT TAKE ACTIONS TO PREVENT "TENDENTIOUS REPORTS" THAT STIR UP CONTROVERSIES.

THE LATEST STRAW

12. (SBU) THE MOST OUTRAGEOUS ATTACK CAME 3/13, WHEN STATE NEWS AGENCY VENPRES PRINTED A PSEUDONYMOUS OPINION PIECE ACCUSING

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THREE JOURNALISTS NOTED FOR THEIR CRITICISMS OF THE GOV (AND FOR PUBLISHING EXPLOSIVE STATE DOCUMENTS SUGGESTING TIES WITH COLOMBIAN GUERRILLA) OF BEING "NARCO-JOURNALISTS" PAID
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BY DRUG TRAFFICKERS TO SLANDER CHAVEZ AND THE GOV. THE JOURNALISTS HAVE ALREADY FILED LAWSUITS, AND ONE CHARGED THAT DEFENSE MINISTER RANGEL IS BEHIND THE ATTACKS. (NOTE: RANGEL HAS PUBLICLY CONDEMNED THE ARTICLE AND CALLED FOR AN INVESTIGATION. VENPRES DIRECTOR MAJOR OSCAR NAVAS RESIGNED 3/18 OVER THE INCIDENT.)

GOV RHYMES AND REASONS

13. (SBU) THE GOV PAYS A PRICE EACH TIME IT RENEWS ITS AGGRESSIVE RHETORIC TOWARD THE MEDIA, BUT THE GOV APPEARS TO BELIEVE THE PRICE WORTHWHILE. THE AGGRESSIONS HAVE BEEN PARTIALLY SUCCESSFUL: VENEZUELAN MEDIA ENGAGE IN SELF-CENSORSHIP, SOME ARE MORE CAUTIOUS ABOUT COVERING THE MORE BOISTEROUS EVENTS, AND THERE MAY HAVE BEEN SOME DETERIORATION IN MEDIA CREDIBILITY AMONG CHAVEZ'S BASE.

14. (SBU) THE GOV FACES A PUBLIC RELATIONS DILEMMA CAUSED BY COMPETING POLITICAL NEEDS. FOR ITS IMAGE ABROAD, INCLUDING WITH THE USG, IT HAS TO DEMONSTRATE THAT PRESS FREEDOM (AND THUS VENEZUELAN DEMOCRACY) IS NOT THREATENED. BUT IT FEELS IT MUST DEFEND ITS DOMESTIC POLITICAL LEGITIMACY FROM WHAT

IT SEES AS A HOSTILE MEDIA CONSPIRACY - NOT REALIZING THAT THIS HOSTILITY IS THE PRODUCT OF NATURAL MEDIA SKEPTICISM AGGRAVATED BY THREE YEARS OF GOV INSULTS AND THREATS. NOT THE LEAST OF GOV OBS

TACLES TO A SUCCESSFUL PUBLIC RELATIONS

CAMPAIGN IS THE PRESIDENT'S OWN UNPREDICTABILITY AND
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IRASCIBILITY. TELLINGLY, GOV OFFICIALS PREFER TO CENTER THEIR DEFENSE ON THE ABSENCE OF THE MOST EGREGIOUS ABUSES OF PRESS FREEDOM - JAILED REPORTERS, MEDIA SHUT DOWN - RATHER THAN DISCUSS THE ISSUE OF "PRESSURES" AGAINST THE MEDIA. THIS PREFERENCE MAY BE BECAUSE MOST OBSERVERS WOULD CONSIDER WIRETAPS, DEATH THREATS, TAX INVESTIGATIONS, PUBLIC INSULTS, SECRET POLICE SHADOWING AND THE LIKE AS INSTANCES OF SUCH PRESSURE.

15. (SBU) THE VEERING PUBLIC STANCE ALSO REFLECTS THE COMPETING

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DIRECTIONS, OR LACK OF DIRECTION, OF THE GOV'S PUBLIC RELATIONS STRATEGY. THE GOV VACILLATES BETWEEN AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA STRATEGY AND AN AGGRESSIVE STRATEGY AIMED AT INTIMIDATION AND DISPARAGEMENT. THE ALTERNATIVE MEDIA STRATEGY INCLUDES (1) VARIOUS ATTEMPTS AT A QUASI-OFFICIAL NEWSPAPER; (2) PROMOTING THE STATE TV AND RADIO AS THE EXCLUSIVE BROADCASTERS OF PRESIDENTIAL SPEECHES; (3) FAVORING MEDIA SEEN AS LIKELY TO B

E SYMPATHETIC WHILE

IGNORING UNCOOPERATIVE MEDIA; (4) FOSTERING NEW, POLITICALLY SUPPORTIVE MEDIA; AND (PERHAPS) (5) A SINCERE FAITH IN THE "CADENAS" (LITERALLY, "NETWORKS," PRESIDENTIAL BROADCASTS THAT MUST BE CARRIED BY ALL TV AND RADIO STATIONS) AS A NECESSARY ANTIDOTE TO MEDIA IMBALANCE AND THUS WELCOMED BY THE VENEZUELAN PUBLIC.

16. (SBU) BUT THE SECOND APPROACH, MARKED BY OFTEN FIERCE AGGRESSIVENESS AND DIRTY TRICKS, IS CLEARLY THE GOVERNMENT'S PREDOMINANT TENDENCY. SOMETIMES THE ATTEMPTED PRESSURE IS LESS OVERT (E.G., TAXES, LUCRATIVE PUBLIC SECTOR ADVERTISING CONTRACTS, "ADMINISTRATIVE MECHANISMS" SUCH AS CONATEL

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REVIEWS OR THE CONTENT LAW). AT OTHER TIMES THERE IS NO PRETENCE OF BEING DISCREET, AND CHAVEZ USES HIS MOST OFFENSIVE RHETORIC (RIDICULING PERSONAL APPEARANCE AND ACCENTS, INSULTING DECEASED FATHERS, INCITING VIOLENT PASSIONS AGAINST REPORTERS). MOST OMINOUS - IF ONE BELIEVES THEY ARE NOT INNOCUOUS, INDEPENDENT, AND SPONTANEOUS GRASSROOTS NGOS - IS THE UNLEASHING OF THE SO-FAR UNARMED AND ROWDY BUT ONLY SYMBOLICALLY VIOLENT BOLIVARIAN CIRCLE PROTESTS.

17. (SBU) COMMENT: THE MEDIA IS FILLING THE ROLE THE POLITICAL PARTIES HAVE ABANDONED - LEADING THE OPPOSITION AGAINST THE GOVERNMENT, AND THE GOVERNMENT CLEARLY PERCEIVES THE PRESS AS ITS ENEMY. NEITHER WILL GIVE THE OTHER THE BENEFIT OF THE DOUBT, AND FABRICATED DOCUMENTS, INTERVIEWS AND INFORMATION ABOUND. THE PUBLISHERS ARE SERIOUSLY WORRIED ABOUT THE PRESS CONTENT LAW' BUT NO DRAFT HAS BEEN RELEASED, ALTHOUGH SEVERAL CLAIM TO HAVE SEEN IT. CHAVEZ APPEARS TO HAVE FINALLY CONVINCED MEDIA CZAR GUSTAVO CISNEROS TO MEET WITH HIM IN EARLY APRIL (SEPTTEL). ONE THING IS CERTAIN: CHAVEZ WILL CONTINUE TO ATTACK THE MEDIA AND THE MEDIA WILL CONTINUE POUNDING ON HIM. END COMMENT.

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